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ABSTRACT

A survey of randomly-selected Alabama principals sought to compare a theorist's model of educational administration with the actual model used by working principals. The 172 principals ranked the importance of 13 statements about administrative priorities drawn from the theoretical model, a three-part construct combining administrative processes, resources, and objectives. The principals also provided data on their professional histories and their schools and volunteered extensive comments on the problems of their jobs. The principals' rankings indicated that all the statements were equally important, a finding that failed to support the theoretical model. Combined with the respondents' comments, these results show that principals do not share general agreement on education administration and that they work in situations of uncertainty in which problems and objectives must be handled on a piecemeal basis. (RW)

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WHEN GLOBAL MODELS FAIL: THE ADMINISTRATOR AS "FIREFIGHTER"

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ABSTRACT

This study reports an attempt to validate a model of education administration. An analysis of the results of a survey of 316 public school principals indicate the lack of a common view of the administrative enterprise by principals of public schools. Comments by principals suggest that administrative priorities are determined reactively on a day-to-day basis. These findings are discussed with reference to uncertainty as the essential administrative reality.

WHEN GLOBAL MODELS FAIL: THE ADMINISTRATOR AS "FIREFIGHTER"

In recent years a call has gone forth to develop a scientific knowledge base for educational administration. Hoy (7) notes that empirical investigations of theoretical propositions or "basic" research are being overwhelmed by an emphasis on "practice, relevance, and utility." In spite of the relative preponderance of applied work in the field, Willower (11) notes that an ongoing interest in a scientific approach represents a maturation of the field.

A basic question relevant to any area of academic inquiry centers on a description of those processes which characterize that area. For the field of educational administration theorists have presented conceptual descriptions of the field. While a number of models have been advanced, there has not been an attempt to validate any model against a model provided by practicing line administrators.

Horn (6) presents three major categories of definitions for administration. These are: process definitions, job analysis definitions, and style definitions. Process theorists (9, 3) focus on the things administrators do to achieve an outcome. Such things might include "coordinating", "influencing", "directing", or "organizing." Separate from, although related to, a process definition is one which focuses on the things administrators do in performing

their role. These "jobs" may include staff supervision, planning and evaluating or maintaining the physical plant (10). A third type of definition focuses upon the style of the administrator and the climate which is created (10). Style types may include democratic vs. authoritarian, or open vs. controlling.

A comprehensive, integrated model of administration is provided by Horn (6). This model may be visualized as a three factor cube.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Administrators may be described as acquiring or utilizing (process) the resources of time, personnel, and money to achieve specific objectives. The smooth integration of these dimensions of administration are seen as essential to the support of instruction.

In a provocative article, Greenfield (2) reminds us that our theories must have some psychological validity and logic for people in "everyday situations." The purpose of this present study was to validate Horn's (6) model with the model held by principals. This study proposed to identify discrete clusters of administrative activities meaningful to line administrators. This study reflects an attempt to bridge the space between theoretical descriptions of administration and the model in use by practicing administrators in general.

Method

Instrument Development

Thirteen statements derived directly from the Horn (6) model were developed. These statements were randomly ordered on the instrument. The statements which constituted the instrument and the dimensions (in parenthesis) from which they were drawn are presented below:

1. An important administrative objective is the support of curriculum. (Curriculum)
2. An administrator must obtain the tools necessary to get the job done. (Process of Acquisition)
3. A necessary task for an administrator is a public relations program. (Public Relations)
4. Planning and evaluation are significant administration problems. (Planning and evaluation).
5. A significant concern for an administrator is the physical plant. (Physical Plant)
6. An administrator must remember that fiscal/material factors will affect a program's outcome. (Fiscal Resources)
7. An administrator must utilize all available sources of support. (Process of Utilization)
8. An important administrative factor is the program staff. (Personnel Resources)

9. A goal of an administrator is the support of staff personnel.
(Staff)
10. The management of time is an essential administrative activity.
(Time Resources)
11. For an administrator, pupil personnel are a significant focus.
(Pupil Personnel)
12. An administrator needs to be concerned with over-all business management. (Business Management)
13. An administrator must be concerned with managing support services. (Support services)

Accompanying the instrument were a cover letter, an instruction sheet and a supplementary response form. Administrators were asked to rank the statements from 1 to 13 in order of importance as administrative activities.

Survey and Data Analysis Procedures

A random sample of 316 public school principals throughout the State of Alabama received copies of the instrument and a stamped self-addressed return envelope. The sample was drawn from a list of over 1200 principals, maintained by the Alabama State Department of Education (1). A return of 172 or nearly 55% was received. Over 20% of the returned instruments contained comments, many of them lengthy. In view of the response rate and the number of written comments, it was felt that a meaningful sample of principals

had been drawn.

Principals in this study were administratively experienced (10.76 years $\pm$ 7.3) and worked in a variety of school settings. Seventy-five (44%) were principals of elementary schools, 24 (14%) of middle schools, 55 (32%) of high schools, 9 (5%) of schools with grades kindergarten through 12, 5 (3%) of kindergarten through grades 8 or 9, and 2 (1%) of grades 7-12.

Obtained rankings for the administrative activities were analyzed with Friedman's (8) method for randomized blocks. In this study, administrative functions were seen as variates while individual principals are considered as blocks. Follow-up comparisons between all possible pairs of variates were investigated with a two-tailed Wilcoxon's matched pairs test. For each comparison the alpha level was adjusted following the method of Ryan (8).

Results

Table 1 presents the mean ranking obtained from the survey (ranks ranged from 4.99 for item 1 to 8.72 for item 13) for each

Insert Table 1 about here

activity. The overall Friedman's (8) statistic was significant ($X^2 = 141.22$, $n = 172$, $df = 12$, $p < .001$), indicating statistical difference among items. The Wilcoxon's follow-up procedure

explored the sources of those differences. In Table 1, bars joining sets of items indicate those items which do not differ significantly. There are six such sets and inspection of the data indicates substantial overlap among them. As no item or set of items differ significantly from all others, it was impossible to partition the items into significantly differing groups. Rather, there was an overall trend for ranks to rise from item 1 to item 13.

Further analysis reveals a probable source of the overall significant variation in rank as indicated by the Friedman statistic. The Spearman's rank correlation coefficient of the item number and mean rank was .974 ($n = 13$, $p < .001$). Since the item number in Table 1 refers simply to the order in which items were presented, and since administrative activities were presented in a random order, the highly significant correlation suggests a strong position effect in this ranking task, to wit, items that were presented first tended to receive higher ranking, those presented later received lower ranking. An overwhelming position effect probably accounts for the observed variation in ranks and the significance of the Friedman statistic.

The comments written by the principals provides a suggestion that the quantitative results accurately reflect a valid description of the way administrators define what they do. Most striking was the heterogeneity of the responses. Some principals noted that

the "child" was the primary concern while "style", "philosophy", "discipline", "support of teachers", "selecting staff", or simple "survival" were primary administrative activities. A number of principals suggested that their rankings were not stable and noted that rankings would change depending upon "which wheel is squeaking the loudest." One principal wrote "all are important, except I have a sewer problem today; if it is not corrected we will have no school tomorrow. PTA meeting tomorrow. I have just returned from a teacher evaluation and found a letter on my desk suggesting that I meet with the Legislature tomorrow."

The heterogeneity and immediacy of the principals' concerns, as well as the possible instability of rankings indicate a distinct lack of ordering of these activities by principals in general. The strong position effect suggests that principals may have relied on contextual cues, e.g., order of presentation, to help them complete the task of ranking activities that were actually all equally important to them.

Discussion

The quantitative and qualitative results did not support Horn's model. The results suggest a decided lack of agreement among principals in general as to administrative priorities.

The finding that administrators in general lack a coherent, common view of the administrative process has been noted by Hills (5).

She observed that " . . . problems or objectives, are treated as discrete, isolated entities. That, in turn, yields a piece-meal, non-systematic approach to problem-solving." In an analysis of school administration and contingency theory, Hanson (4) suggests that schools see strategic planning as a poor resource investment in uncertain times. As uncertainty is an essential administrative reality, many administrators cope by investing resources into the day-by-day task of "firefighting" recurrent problems or "imposing standard operating procedures" on seemingly endless troubles.

If there is value in the products of synthetic-analytic problem solving, the implications for Education Administration training programs are clear. Emphasis needs to be placed on how to solve problems rather than how to accomplish specific objectives. The wider the repertoire of perspectives an administrator can bring to bear on a problem cluster, the more powerful will be the solution.

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Notes

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TABLE 1
COMPARISON OF PRINCIPALS RANKINGS OF ADMINISTRATIVE ACTIVITIES

ADMINISTRATIVE ACTIVITY	ITEM NUMBER ^a	MEAN RANK	WILCOXON'S TEST ^b
Curriculum Support	1	4.99	
Process of Acquisition	2	5.66	
Public Relations	3	6.33	
Planning/Evaluation	4	6.50	
Physical Plant	5	6.70	
Personnel Resources	8	6.83	
Fiscal Resources	6	6.92	
Process of Utilization	7	7.25	
Staff Support	9	7.30	
Business Management	12	7.87	
Time Resources	10	7.88	
Pupil Personnel	11	8.06	
Support Services	13	8.72	

^aItem number refers to the order of item presentation on the survey instrument.

^bSignificant group differences at $p \leq .05$ adjusted by Ryans procedure.

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Figure Caption

Figure 1. Model of Education Administration, After Horn (6).

